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Love is the Drug

Michael Fuller admires the richness and complexity of Graham Vick's 'Tristan' in Berlin

Tristan und Isolde. Stephen Gould (Tristan), Nina Stemme (Isolde), Ryan McKinny (Kurwenal), Tanja Ariane Baumgartner (Brangäne), Liang Li (King Mark), Jörg Schörner (Melot), Attilio Glaser (Young Sailor), Peter Maus (Shepherd), Seth Carico (Steersman); Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper, Berlin/Donald Runnicles; Graham Vick (director), Paul Brown (set and costume designer), Wolfgang Göbbel (lighting). Deutsche Oper, Berlin, 12 June 2016

Tristan und Isolde is an extraordinarily rich work of art, and Graham Vick's production for the Deutsche Oper Berlin, first unveiled in 2011, is an extraordinarily rich staging of it. The set consists of a long wall facing the audience, across the diagonals of the stage in the first two acts, and square-on in the third. Through doors in this wall various rooms can be seen: a kitchen, a bathroom, a room that serves as Isolde's dressing-room. In the middle of the wall is an array of glass doors, and these serve as a threshold through which 'other' worlds may be seen: this allows for juxtapositions of this opera's various binary opposites – interior and exterior, light and darkness, day and night, life and death – to be seen on either side of the glass. Various items of furniture remain through all three acts: a leather sofa, a kitchen table, a couple of hard chairs. An enormous lamp hanging from the flies is perpetually on the move, rising, falling, and illuminating different areas of the stage. The costumes are all contemporary.

Act I opens with Isolde standing on the table dressed in a wedding gown, to which Brangäne is attending; she quickly divests herself of it. Tristan, meanwhile, sits oblivious on the sofa, a brass-trimmed wooden coffin (which appears in all three acts) at his feet, along with a young boy who plays on the top of the coffin with a paper boat (this act's sole nod to its supposed nautical setting). King Mark sits throughout in an armchair, his back to the audience, staring through the glass doors. A naked woman appears, and leads the boy offstage through the glass doors: later, a little girl appears, playing with Isolde's bridal veil and shoes, and exits similarly – indications, perhaps, of the threshold that is crossed with the awakening of sexuality? The 'Liebestrank' prepared by Brangäne is brought on by her in a hypodermic syringe: Tristan and Isolde bare their arms, apply tourniquets and inject themselves with it. Isolde is re-attired in her bridal gown to be presented to the king and confetti falls from the flies as the act concludes.

In Act II, we are cleverly presented with an indoor space to one side of the stage, but an outdoor space in front of the glass doors, lit as though by moonlight, and dotted with obelisks. Characters who enter this area thereby step out of the 'interior' world of light and enter an 'exterior' world of semi-darkness. Within this area a naked man leans on a spade, before rubbing himself with soil and walking into a part-dug hole, which he continues to excavate: the naked woman returns briefly, to watch him. Meanwhile, figures enjoying a drinks party stand in an illuminated space behind the windows: rather than douse a torch, Isolde draws curtains to cut them off from view. All this very effectively establishes the physical and spiritual 'otherness' of the location in which the lovers meet, and sing their duet (which is cut, in the usual fashion). After



Tristan (Stephen Gould), Isolde (Nina Stemme) and the leather sofa in the 'interior world of light' in Graham Vick's production. Photo: Bettina Stoess

King Mark and Melot have intervened, Tristan hands his own sword (this being the only one on the stage) to the latter, before impaling himself on it.

Act III opens with the wall again straightforwardly defining interior and exterior spaces, as in the first act. Tristan stares through the glass doors, as rain falls against them. His hands shake, after the fashion of an addict in need of a fix: not literally asleep, as Kurwenal and the Shepherd describe him, but clearly dead to the world. As Isolde arrives, Tristan exits through the glass doors so that they do not see each other, and he sings his final 'Isolde' offstage. She, haggard and with her hair (formerly reddish) now bleached, sings 'Ich bin's, ich bin's, süssester Freund!' to the coffin, before collapsing unconscious over the table. Brangäne arrives bearing more 'potion' with which she injects her mistress, enabling her to recover and sing her final Transfiguration. At the conclusion of this she steps through the glass doors and joins a steady stream of oth-

ers walking slowly across the rear of the stage – presumably, souls journeying to some extra-spatial and extra-temporal destination.

This staging confronts head-on a modernist dilemma in interpreting a work like *Tristan und Isolde*. Is it ultimately concerned with ‘this-worldly’ matters (its intricacies being explicable in purely naturalistic terms), or is its intention to offer its audience a glimpse of something transcending them? Vick’s approach is an ingenious melding of these apparently contradictory metaphysical positions. On the one hand, this is a naturalistic understanding of the story, set for the most part in a modern context, in which the ‘love’ of Tristan and Isolde is presented as a drug-induced co-dependency ending inevitably with the deaths of the protagonists. On the other, it is a presentation which acknowledges radical ‘otherness’ as a transcendent state to which access is possible, whether through love, death, or rites of passage which can take us across its threshold. This is a liminal presentation of an opera which is greatly concerned with the liminal. And if, as Roger Scruton puts it in his study of *Tristan und Isolde*, the mythic is that which ‘acquaints us with ourselves and our condition, using symbols and characters that give objective form to our inner compulsions’, then this is also a production which reaches into the world of myth, through the obelisks and the naked figures recalling Adam (the gardener) and Eve. All this being said, the sheer fecundity of Vick’s symbolic imagination means that it would be foolhardy to impose any straightforward narrative thread on his interpretation of Wagner’s drama. This is not so much a story told as a story multiply re-imagined, refracted simultaneously through myriad prisms.

From a purely musical point of view, this was a performance possessing an internal logic regardless of any stage setting. Donald Runnicles unerringly found the pulse of the music, and if the orchestral decibels he conjured up were not always kind to his singers, the majority of the principals still managed to ride the waves of sound with aplomb. Stephen Gould’s tireless Tristan rang out thrillingly throughout his Act III agonies, and if Vick’s *Konzept* did not require huge feats from him in the acting department, that was probably no bad thing. Nina Stemme must now be peerless as Isolde, and she too projected evenly and powerfully throughout: this was a truly thrilling assumption of the role. Tanja Ariane Baumgartner partnered her perfectly as Brangäne, and sang her offstage warning in Act II exquisitely. The rich, warm and powerful bass of Liang Li, a replacement King Mark, fitted the role perfectly: this was a highly sympathetic account, despite some occasionally quirky pronunciation. Ryan McKinny, another replacement as Kurwenal, revealed a pleasingly rounded baritone, but was too frequently submerged by the orchestra. The chorus acquitted itself well in its brief appearance in Act I.

Vick’s production of *Tristan und Isolde* is extraordinarily rich in ideas, and doubtless further viewings of it would reveal more of them. In its powerful presentation of the possibilities of a transcendent reality, set unflinchingly in a modern context which on the surface might appear to be hostile to such possibilities, it represents a remarkable achievement.